

THE SIRHAN CASE

Killing a Father

As an artful jailhouse lawyer among the losers and small fry of criminality, James Earl Ray had plenty of opportunities to learn the wisdom of keeping his mouth shut. Playing D. & D. (deaf and dumb) with cops was a lesson taught in the quiet back rooms of precinct houses. And until he achieved "the big time" in Memphis, the killer of Martin Luther King never merited the attention of policemen who relied on brains rather than bullying.

It was considerably different for Sirhan Bishara Sirhan. Senator Robert Kennedy's assassin was accorded instant criminal stardom the moment he pulled the trigger of his cheap .22-cal. pistol. Furthermore, the Los Angeles law-enforcement officers who sought to induce Sirhan to talk about himself and his crime were big-league pros who meticulously respected his rights while attempting to get him to confess. And yet the young Jordanian also knew how to be D. & D. For almost 24 hours, Sirhan could not even be identified; he did not object to being called John Doe. Nonetheless, Sirhan could become almost garrulous about such unrelated matters as the high cost of childbirth, the Boston strangler and the state of the stock market.

Hypomania and Paranoia. All this was recorded for posterity on tape at Los Angeles police headquarters. There was the sound of Sirhan kicking a cup of hot chocolate so that it spattered over a policeman's uniform—and the sounds of scrubbing as paper towels were used to clean up the mess. As the night wore on, Sirhan's voice grew stronger, underlining his return to a state of self-control. He began fencing with his interrogators, even flattering them on occasion with Dale Carnegie-like sincerity. "I appreciate that," he would say, or "I respect you for that." He twitted one man about his age ("You must have married late") and his weight ("Like all Americans physical health gone"). At one point he was asked what he was laughing about. "I'm always agreeable," replied the voice from the recorder. This seeming self-possession was one reason why the prosecution last week played the tapes to the jury trying Sirhan, hoping thereby to demolish defense pleas that Sirhan was either insane or suffering from "diminished responsibility" when he committed his act.

There were moments, however, amid the silences, grunts and inconsequential chatter of the tapes, that elicited happy looks from Sirhan's defenders. When talk somehow turned to jigsaw puzzles, Sirhan was heard to remark impatiently: "If I can't do it fast enough—if I can't match the whole picture—I give up." To Dr. Martin Schorr, a San Diego psychologist, much of Sirhan's taped prattle reinforced his own diagnosis of acute mental illness. Schorr subjected Sirhan

to batteries of psychiatric tests, which showed, he contended, hypomania and paranoia. As for hypomania, "There is something driving this man," Schorr summed up paranoia as "I am O.K.; everybody else isn't."

Wrong Sex. Schorr explained that Sirhan hated the father who had returned to Jordan in 1957, leaving his family in the U.S. "But somewhere along the line," Schorr stated, "the protecting mother fails her son." The failure, it is speculated, was Mary Sirhan's support for Kennedy, a man Sirhan once professed to admire but later hated as a friend of Israel. In Schorr's view, this led to the killing. The only real solution, the psychologist averred, is for Sirhan "to look for a compromise [to killing his father]. He does. He finds a symbolic replica of his father in the form of Kennedy, kills him, and also removes the relationship that stands between him and his most precious possession—his mother's love."

Unfortunately for the defense's case, Schorr's diagnosis—and several other key passages of his testimony—are close paraphrases or, in some instances, verbatim quotes from a 1968 book on psychiatric detection, *Casebook of a Crime Psychiatrist* (Bernard Geis Associates; \$5.95). However, the author, Dr. James A. Brussel, New York State's former assistant commissioner of mental hygiene, was describing a murder that involved an entirely different psychosis. In "The Christmas Eve Killer," the chapter that so impressed Schorr, the murderer was driven to kill a woman who resembled his mother in some respects. Sirhan, if Schorr is correct, substituted Kennedy for his absent father—the final act of an Oedipean tragedy. In any event, Schorr, who admits that he read the book before the trial, is likely to face a withering prosecution cross-examination over his mixed-up use of a psychiatrist's material.

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PSYCHOLOGIST SCHORR
Prattle to reinforce the diagnosis.